

Eddie's Suitcase



by Dennis J. Truett

Have you ever needed to write an essay on a person who most influenced your life? Back in Parochial high school I had to. I probably wrote about some priest or saint just because I wanted a good mark. Later in life I realize there was actually someone who did influence my character and who I am. I should have written about him then. That person was Eddie... Eddie Graffner.

To accurately describe my friend Eddie in one word, I would have to say he was a "Gypsy". He was a 70 year old local handyman, who worked in Florida in the winter and New York in the summer. My Mom always said he had "Hands of Gold" because he could build or fix anything. He didn't own anything but his car with all his belongings in it. The car itself was a 1950 Hudson Hornet, out of which he had taken the back seat to make room for all his tools. His wheel

barrel could be seen strapped to the trunk between jobs. The car didn't run very well, and was always getting flat tires. Neither the radio, or the heater worked. I have no idea where he actually lived and suppose he obtained lodging by way of the "Barter System" The man was in his seventies, had no family and no property he could call his own. I don't know if there was ever a Mrs. Graffner. If there was, he never spoke of her. I probably should have asked.

I worked for Eddie as a laborer during the summer months in high school. Looking back I really think he wanted company more than production. He always got both. There were times he would pick me up on a Friday and travel to long Island for a project, returning on Sunday night. For me, these trips were more play than work, and I was being paid well. I'll never forget our trip to Coney Island Park. I rode the Steeple Chase and the Parachute Jump; both of which are gone and now part of history. He specifically wanted me to see The original "NATHANS" He said, "Watch the guy on the grill making the hot dogs. See how organized he is and how well he handles the one and only tool to gather, grill, and serve the dogs". This was Mr. Nathan himself. There were many people being serving so quickly, but there were no lines. Eddie explained, "It's all in how you organize your work that determines how much work gets done" One day I had ten windows to paint. Eddie had a wind up alarm clock and put it on the floor next to me. He said, "You should want to be good at whatever you do. See how long the first window takes, and then beat that time on the second and third. But don't sacrifice your quality of work." Later in life I heard the phrase somewhere, "Work smarter, not harder" I realized I had already learned this lesson, from Eddie. Some times when he had to leave a job he would say, "Dennis, you're in charge." I knew I really wasn't, but it made me feel good, and I just wanted to make sure he found I had done a good job in his absence. He always complimented me. Another lesson was learned.

After I earned my driver license, Eddie would send me for coffee at break time. He always allowed me to buy jelly donuts... my favorite. He told me to get whatever I needed in cash out of the glove compartment. This wasn't just loose change! I think it was all the money he had. One day I asked him why he was so trusting to leave all that money in easy reach. He said, Dennis, a man that will steal a dime will steal a dollar. And I know you would never steal a dime"

One day he asked me to go to the car and bring back his Yankee screwdriver. This was an expensive tool

that you don't see around today. It was probably replaced by today's cordless screwdrivers. While looking for it, I found a suitcase, buried and covered with masonry tools, cement mix and sand in the back of the car. It had two keyed locks on it with a large black strap around the whole case. I could tell it hadn't been opened in quite some time. I also found his tool and brought it to him and of course, I asked about the suit case. "Some day, when I think the time is right, we'll sit down and talk about my suit case," he said In a stern voice that I had never heard before.

Time passed, and now I was in the summer months following High School Graduation. I was still working for Eddie, mostly because I enjoyed it, but I knew our time was drawing to a close. One day, without being asked, Eddie said that it was time for us to finally sit down and open his suit case. He found a nice place by a lake and a picnic table. To my surprise he took a couple beers out of a brown bag as we sat by the water's edge with his treasure. All along, I thought it would be filled with dirty laundry, and that would be



his final lesson. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a ring of keys. Because there were so many he fumbled for a long time. As I sat there I wondered how this man could have so many keys when he really didn't own anything, let alone

lock it up! He found this one very small key that fit both locks. He removed the belt and twisted the still closed case to face me. Well the anticipation was just killing me. I was almost afraid to open it. Would I find something valuable, or terrible? One thing was for sure, It would be his final lesson. Maybe this was his best lesson of all. Slowly I opened the case. Now I don't know if you've ever been to a race track, but if you have, you'll know that when you place a bet on a horse and you lose, the ticket stub is usually thrown on the ground. Apparently Eddie had been to the track many times before I ever met him. Neatly placed in the case were bundles of ticket stubs held together with heavy rubber bands. These were not two dollar bets; they were mostly fifties and hundreds. This was shocking to see, but it also answered a lot of My unasked questions. All he said, with a tear in his eye was" Dennis, let this be a lesson to you. Make something out of your life, and don't make these mistakes like I did".

I never saw my friend again, but I have always wondered what happened to him. We all have a little angel that sits on our shoulders telling us what to do, or not to do.... Mine is named Eddie